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ABSTRACT

A study outlined the processes through which two beginning elementary teachers in the San Francisco Bay area learned to overcome institutional constraints which tended to standardize ethnically diverse students' responses to literature. The study focused specifically on the changes in one teacher's instruction which freed her third/fourth grade children's literature responses to match more closely those they exhibited in their play, casual conversations, and other social interactions. To understand the changes in both teachers' and childrens' learning, multiple forms of data were collected, including: taped and transcribed conversations about teaching and learning at monthly collaborative meetings; videotapes of monthly classroom observations, children's responsive conversations, and audiotaped open-ended teacher interviews about literacy lessons; teacher's collections of portfolio-type evidence of two target children's progress in each classroom; and three whole-class measures of response to narrative and expository text. Themes were traced through the data using perspectives from feminist epistemological and critical theories as well as sociocognitive and sociocultural response theories. Three processes emerged from the data as supporting the teacher's learning: (1) critiquing the constraints on children's responses; (2) seeking support for instructional changes; and (3) observing resultant changes in children's responses. (Sixteen references are attached.) (Author/MG)

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LEARNING TO TEACH LITERATURE: STRUCTURING CLASSROOM TASKS TO FREE CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO TEXT

Sandra Hollingsworth and
Mary Dybdahl

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Abstract

This paper outlines the processes through which two beginning elementary teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area learned to overcome institutional constraints which tended to "standardize" ethnically diverse students' responses to literature. It specifically tells the story of changes in Mary Dybdahl's instruction which freed her third/fourth-grade children's literature responses to match more closely those they exhibited in their play, casual conversations, and other social interactions. To understand the changes in both teachers' and children's learning, multiple forms of data were collected: (a) taped and transcribed conversations about teaching and learning at monthly collaborative meetings; (b) videotapes of monthly classroom observations, children's responsive conversations, and audiotaped open-ended teacher interviews about literacy lessons; (c) teacher's collections of portfolio-type evidence of two target children's progress in each classroom; and (d) three whole-class measures of responses to narrative and expository text. These triangulated data were independently coded and analyzed using a constant comparative approach.

Themes were traced through the data using perspectives from feminist epistemological and critical theories as well as sociocognitive and sociocultural response theories. Three processes emerged from the data as supporting the teachers' learning: (1) critiquing the constraints on children's responses, (2) seeking support for instructional changes, and (3) observing resultant changes in children's responses. Each process is discussed in turn.

LEARNING TO TEACH LITERATURE: STRUCTURING CLASSROOM TASKS TO FREE CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO TEXT[1]

Sandra Hollingsworth and Mary Dybdahl[2]

> Having kids write responses to questions seems to be a method of preparing them for handling school. . . . Is it our job as teachers to help them be successful in school whether we think that particular [response style] is helping them in the subject--say reading--or not? (MD: 3/14: 7)

Mary Dybdahl's question became the focal issue for a series of classroom inquiries into reshaping her literacy program. This report describes the processes through which Mary and another beginning elementary teacher both identified problems in children's interpretive responses to literature and made and evaluated instructional changes.

Background

The current study is part of a larger program of research begun during the teachers' graduate-level teacher education programs at the University of California, Berkeley. A goal of this longitudinal work is to describe how teachers' emerging theories of literacy instruction are shaped by their interactions with other theories and perspectives--as represented by their teacher education program instructors, teaching colleagues, and administrative policies--and through their relationships with students who are learning to read, write, and understand text in schools. In the interest of clarity, I've written about these teachers' interactions with instructors, colleagues, and policies in a companion piece (Hollingsworth, 1990). This report focuses on their evolving perceptions of their work with children.

Mary Dybdahl had completed a fifth- and sixth-year elementary certification program ending with a master's degree at University of California, Berkeley, and was in her second year of

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[1]This paper was originally presented in November 1990 to the National Reading Conference in Miami.

[2]Sandra Hollingsworth, an assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is a senior researcher in the Institute for Research on Teaching working on the Students' Response to Literature Instruction Project. Mary Dybdahl is a third/fourth-grade teacher at Edna Widenmann Elementary School In Vallejo, CA.

teaching when this phase of the study began. She taught a combination third/fourth-grade class in an economically limited Bay Area community. Leslie Minarik had completed a fifth-year program at the same institution and was in the third year of her position as a second-grade teacher in a working-class neighborhood. Student populations at both schools were composed primarily of African-American, Hispanic, and Filipino children.

Following the mandates of the California English Language Arts Framework (California State Department of Education, 1987), both schools used literature as the material and philosophic bases of their literacy programs. "Literature" usually took the form of trade books but also meant patterned language stories by well-known authors--especially in the primary grades. The instructional shift was theoretically supported both by the whole-language movement's endorsement of meaningful text (Harste, 1990) and the process approach of the Bay Area Writing Project (Gray, 1988).

The teachers had become familiar with whole-language or process approaches to literature in their teacher education programs, with me as one of their instructors. They had also studied the relationship between classroom tasks and students' cognitive and social responses (Doyle, 1983). They were surprised to discover that task formats for literature instruction, as recommended in their Bay Area schools, limited their students' opportunities for social and personal responses to text; that is, Mary and Leslie noticed that their students' responses to literature tasks (or their read, spoken, and written reactions) were either nonexistent, because they couldn't read, or were "school-bound" and artificial. Their responses in literature discussions often replicated question-and-answer task format patterns and their written responses were dependent upon mechanical features such as spelling and heavy teacher feedback to check "correctness." Children's responses, in effect, matched the tests that measured their abilities better than their own true communication skills. Except to copy or mimic their better praised peers, they rarely interacted with each other when responding. Children were less likely to give the rich and varied responses to literature that they exhibited in their play, casual conversation, and other social interactions.

Thus, the teachers continued to seek education and support to create new task structures to free students' responses.

Specific Method for the Current Study

To understand the changes in both teachers' and children's learning, I collected multiple forms of data: (a) taped and transcribed conversations about teaching and learning at monthly collaborative meetings; (b) videotapes of monthly classroom observations, children's responsive conversations, and audiotaped, open-ended teacher interviews about literacy lessons; (c) teachers' collections of portfolio-type evidence of two target children's progress in each classroom; and (d) three whole-class measures of responses to narrative and expository text. These triangulated data were independently coded and analyzed using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I traced themes through the data using perspectives from feminist epistemological and critical theories (see Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Greene, 1988; Weiler, 1988) as well as sociocognitive and sociocultural response theories (see Au & Jordan, 1981; Doyle, 1983). Too little was currently known about the influence of elementary classroom tasks in the specific area of literary response to assist with these data analyses (Beach & Hynds, 1991). Three categories emerged from the data: (1) critiquing the constraints on children's responses, (2) seeking support for instructional changes, and (3) observing resultant changes in children's responses. Each category is discussed in turn.

Critiquing the Constraints on Children's Responses

One of the most important support processes for Mary's and Leslie's learning was the opportunity to talk about their teaching. A year before this phase of our work began, we had started a series of monthly meetings where Mary, Leslie, and other teachers from their programs who had studied literacy with me as their instructor could get together and talk about their teaching and children's learning. Through this process, they began to recognize and claim their own voices in the conversation, to value and understand differing perspectives, and to see themselves as capable of identifying and challenging institutional constraints (see Hollingsworth, in press).

A district mandate became the focus of conversation near the end of our first year together. It required that teachers switch from literature-based reading programs back to basal programs (which contained literature and "whole-language" activities). Mary and Leslie used the mandate as a catalyst for critique. Feeling constrained in their own freedom to teach, they began to identify features of the new program which restricted students' responses--and thus their progress in becoming literate. In a presentation she gave to the California Reading Association about these concerns, Mary critiqued the mandated program:

> Who is the audience for this reading series? I have heard that over 75% of the school districts statewide have adopted this popular text. I can't believe that the state population is that homogeneous. Take my class for example: 72% of my students are black, 24% are Filipino and 4% are white. This is a very different population from my student-teaching experience in Berkeley. It is a very different population than some other parts of Vallejo. Given this diversity, it is hard to believe that 75% of the elementary school children could be well-served by the same reading series. (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 1989, pp. 10-11)

As she used the graded basal series for the first time, Leslie became aware of children's lack of response to these new texts. Without the easier whole-class responses encouraged by the patterned language in popular trade literature and language experience activities, Leslie found that she had nonreaders in her second-grade class:

> When we were required to use the grade-level books, the other teacher [who taught the same grade] and I got together and were panic-stricken because we knew some of our kids couldn't read them. And then we asked for material [from the previous grade] so we could start our kids there, but they refused to do that. . . . So then we were faced with sneaking around to get copies of the material and photocopying parts of it. (CM: 2/1: 14)

Mary identified similar problems in her fourth-grade classroom. She talked about her lack of knowledge about teaching nonreaders and criticized institutional systems which left her unsupported for that task:

> By the end of my first year of teaching, I was devoted to the concept that children need to learn to read, preferably before they reach the fourth grade. I had managed to avoid first grade but I hadn't avoided beginning readers. It was painfully obvious that I didn't have the tools to teach these kids. Maybe this was a failing from my own elementary school education. Maybe it was a failing of my credential program. By the end of the year I even blamed my school district. (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 1989, p. 6)

Seeking Support for Instructional Changes

To seek resolutions to identified dilemmas, teachers elected to spend the second year of our monthly meetings working on them. They each chose literacy instruction methods which were working well in their classrooms and shared what they were learning, how the children's responses were improving, and how they were changing as teachers. Their reports took the form of "showcasing" their knowledge and serving as peer instructors to the group. The others asked questions and took back new ideas for their own classrooms. The ongoing group conversation allowed them to get specific support from other teachers with "specialized knowledge" in a way that they could not get from me alone as a literacy course teacher, from literacy research which sometimes did not correspond with their beliefs or was difficult to apply in their specific classrooms, from generic inservice programs, nor from their peers.

Mary found she could use some information from "veteran" teachers in her school, while she had to disregard other suggestions which did not correspond with her experience and beliefs:

> By the end of my first year, and certainly as I started the second year, I asked for help. I asked every teacher who could spare a minute, "What do you do with your nonreaders? How can you use the core literature books with kids that can't read simple picture books? What do I do with my Spanish-speaking student?"... Most of the teachers attributed the reading problems to the students and their families. "Reading isn't valued at home so why do you expect the students to try?"... All the teachers share the belief that kids at our school are different. They do seem to be needy, noisy, troubled, poor, and too frequently abused. Our students have to deal with so much stress in their lives that sometimes I'd rather show them some love than make them struggle through another reading assignment. I keep saying that I ask other teachers for support and feedback. I'm beginning to believe that question may be a key for me to continue to learn to teach. (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 1989, pp. 6-7)

Of course teachers could also seek specific assistance from me. Their questions were not unlike those they had raised as students when I was their literacy methods instructor but now were considered critically, as Leslie indicated:

> So I asked Sam [Hollingsworth what to do], and she was the one who got me started on this additional approach. And I've had some time to use it and think of some pros and cons and ways I can adapt it to my classroom, and also think of some alternative things that need to be done. (CM: 2/1: 15,16)

The task format I recommended was based on a program initially developed by Jim Guszak (1985). My recommendation supported many of the instructional features Leslie was using with an additional emphasis on specific letter-sound practice for children who needed that sort of practice to fully access and respond to text. The support Leslie received while attempting to apply this new system proved to be important--both for her and for me as feedback in my translation of the approach. Leslie could ask for help with specific features of the new approach she did not understand, watch me model the approach with her children, and get specific feedback for her own teaching. I was able to get feedback on my suggestions as well--as she modified my recommendations.

> They really like it, and it does help them make progress. Then they start really reading their trade and literature books. But [the linguistic texts] make it hard for them to get a handle on what's happening because of so much rhyming and such short stories. And so in addition to using Sam's suggestion, I alternate now with similar books [like Dr. Seuss] that have pictures already drawn, are lengthier, and that have more easily comprehensible story lines. (CM: 2/1: 18, 20)

Observing Resultant Changes in Children's Responses to Literature

Though she incorporated some ideas from me and her peers into her classroom, the lasting changes in Leslie's literacy program were based on observing her own children's responses to the new tasks. She has written about the research of her own teaching and presented the results at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Teel & Minarik, 1990). Mary has also talked about her work to the National Reading Conference (see Dybdahl, 1990). Below is a summary of her research and the resultant instructional changes.

Mary's Research of Her Own Teaching

> I want to know . . . what [my students] think [as they read]. I have to figure out how I can structure a lesson to find that out--or a discussion. I prefer to set it up and then see if I get any reactions to it. Otherwise, I'm doing all of the thinking and I'm doing all of the talking and am pushing my point. (MD: 5/25: 8)

Mary systematically looked at her attempts to structure literacy tasks, noted children's responses, revised her lesson structure, then analyzed the changes. She criticized the whole-class format which was standard practice her school: "The whole-class lesson did not work for my poor

readers. Their responses were limited. They did not tune into the whole-class lesson and they did not benefit from others as reading models" (Dybdahl, 1990, p. 4).

Her first change from that standard practice was to employ a pull-out group for nonreaders. She reflected on her early attempts in a presentation to the California Reading Association. "We would read together, then each student would re-read the passage aloud, taking turns. This worked for less than a month. Every time I tried to work with [that] group the rest of the class would go wild" (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 1989, p. 6).

Later Mary tried round-robin style reading and partnered responses. I observed a lesson in which the text was Warton and the King of the Skies. Here are excerpts from my field notes:

> Mary reviews a little of the story. Points out new vocabulary and talks about internal word structure (suffixes and compound words). The children press her to go on with the actual reading. She has given them each part of the text on numbered papers. They assemble themselves in order, sit in a circle and read. [Though the format is new, children's responses are similar to those of basal reading groups, e.g., attending to text only when it is one's turn to read.] At Mary's request, I pay particular attention to Ajay and Michael, two fourth-grade Filipino boys who often work together in class. They are sitting next to each other. Ajay reads, then looks at Michael to prompt him. Michael looks up at him, "Me?" "Yes," replies Ajay. Ajay looks on while Michael reads. He helps Michael with words he doesn't know.
>
> After all the children have read, Mary questions them to see if they've understood important points in the story. She finds that they are confused and asks their help in how they might read so that they have better understanding. She responds to their suggestions by re-reading the text to them with some expression. Then she asks them to work in pairs, interpreting the story by discussing a central point, then writing and illustrating their response. [Kids scatter themselves around the room, under desks, in the rocker, and on carpet squares.]
>
> I watch Ajay and Michael at this task. They begin to formulate a summary-like response orally, then collaboratively write and illustrate. Both actually write on the same paper, occasionally erasing and rewriting each other's work. As Ajay writes, Michael reads each word. When he leaves something out, Ajay fills in. Ajay reflects on the story. "He had a washtub and rope and" . . . (asks Michael: "What else?") Michael: "a needle." Then Michael continues: "put in -- he saw lots of birds." Ajay writes that, then adds "and bees."
>
> When their written response to the story is complete, they begin to discuss and work on the drawing. Michael: "We should draw the toad. We need the book." (Goes to his desk to get it.) Ajay draws the toad in the basket. . . . Michael tried to draw the balloon. Ajay erased it. Michael says, "I know how now." He then retraces Ajay's lines, with some deviation. (RN: 4/27: 9)

Based on the children's responses to her new structures, Mary dropped the round-robin reading but kept the partnered response format.

Mary found the data the research assistants and I collected useful for her own instructional analyses. In addition to taking notes and/or recording the students' responses to the text during the reading and writing phases, we also videotaped lessons. As with all of our data, we gave tapes and transcripts back to her. Later we left a tape recorder, tapes, and microphone for her use. She listened to the children's talk while she was driving to school. By reviewing data that would be hard for her to collect during on-line teaching, Mary continued to critique and fine-tune the partner format and became even more firmly committed to the structure for re-reading, conversation, writing about and illustrating the story, and sharing cooperatively authored stories. As in Leslie's case, it was Mary's own observations of students which led to changing her response structures.

As the partners worked together, Mary evaluated their responses:

> I walk around with a notebook. And I go through and I write down--I have a section for every kid--I walk around and look at Abraham, Paul, and make notes . . . Abraham wasn't reading. . . . He depends on the other kids to do the reading. . . . Ajay does a lot of the reading but he gives Michael a chance. And when Michael's reading he assists him with decoding words. I make notes like that. (MD: 5/25: 9).

Sometimes her observations helped her pick up misconceptions which guided her task designs:

> Later in the story of Charlotte's Web, Wilbur the pig is entered into a contest. In preparation for the big event, Wilbur is washed in buttermilk. Neither Ajay nor Michael knew what buttermilk was but Ajay figured out how to make sense of the events in the story. He decided buttermilk was somehow related to butterfingers or butterscotch, something sweet and good-smelling. He extended this to make the contest be one based on the winner being the best-smelling pig. Michael thought his was a reasonable explanation and it fit the story perfectly. (Dybdahl, 1990, p. 11)

With such responses as a guide, Mary had students first re-read texts to use the context better to make sense of unknown words and then make notes of those they still did not know and look them up in the dictionary. Watching the partners gave her further feedback on her choice of dictionary work to improve their responses to text:

> In our study of desert ecology and desert cultures, we read a beautiful book called Desert Giant, a story about the life cycle of the saguaro cactus. One reading period I asked the students to read and re-read the first part of the book. I asked them to make a list of all the words they didn't know (either how to pronounce them or the word meanings). . . . Michael and Ajay are good at this kind of activity. As they

> read they stop and write words down. . . . [As a follow-up activity], I asked them to use the dictionary to find word definitions, and they were to illustrate one of the words. Ajay did the writing, Michael used the dictionary and Michael did the drawing. The word they chose was accordion. Although the word was used in the story to describe a characteristic of the saguaro, Michael drew a picture of a person playing the accordion. Ajay seemed pleased with the end product. (Dybdahl, 1990, pp. 9-10)

Despite their misconceptions, Mary was initially convinced that the Michael/Ajay model for good and poor reading pairs should be the determining structural factor. "Michael and Ajay . . . asked to work together. I agreed with their choice. I was sure that Michael would benefit from Ajay's superior abilities" (Dybdahl, 1990, p. 2). She used standardized and classroom tests to create pairs. Some were not socially appropriate: "When I had Mattie and Jamelia work together, it would always end in a fight and fit of tears" (p. 8).

Continuing to observe Ajay and Michael eventually led her to question the objectively based distinction which ranked their literacy skills as strong and poor:

> After carefully watching them and documenting their progress, I have come to understand that Michael and Ajay have an equal partnership. . . . When [they] work together they prefer turning in one written piece between them. Michael admits that he hates to write. The physical action of writing is tedious and aggravating to him. On the other hand Ajay enjoys writing. He does beautiful printing and cursive. His spelling and punctuation are well-developed. What Ajay dislikes is thinking about the story. His comprehension only extends to literal information and sometimes he misses that. This is where Michael steps in. He obviously has been forming ideas and making connections as he reads or is read to. He may not be interested in writing his ideas, but he can express them orally. He refers back to the text or he recalls some detail to support his thinking. Ajay sometimes questions Michael's point of view, but generally he is convinced by Michael's arguments. (Dybdahl, 1990, pp. 8-9)

Mary then questioned the other "strong and weak" pairs she had arranged:

> Cita is a fine reader but she has a deep, muffled voice. She could not project her voice to her partner, Mingo; he couldn't follow along, especially because she reads too fast. When they tried echo reading, in which the slow reader follows along after the better reader, it sounded like total babble. (Dybdahl, 1990, pp. 11)

Pairing children on the basis of their good reading abilities did not improve their responses:

> Nina and Nicole were well-matched academically. Nina is fluent and expressive. She likes to read aloud. She is also competitive. Nicole is a fluent reader, but she lacks self-confidence. Nina berated Nicole for every error and hesitation. Neither student benefitted from the partnership. (pp. 11-12)

Mary concluded that

> the planned pairs did not work. In general students were not attentive to their partners' reading; they were not helpful and all too frequently they were frustrated and angry. The results were not much better than my whole-class lessons. I went back to Michael and Ajay as my models. What worked here was not necessarily the fact that they were correctly matched academically; more to the point was their choice to work together, a fact that I noticed but had not valued. The strength of the partnership was built on friendship, mutual interest and trust. (Dybdahl, 1990, p. 12)

Mary changed her literacy structure once again. And she kept researching the process:

> Students are now encouraged to work with a partner or partners of their choice. Children's responses to the [free-choice partner structure] varied as much as before, but now the responses are more uniformly positive. The amount of discussion and collaborative writing has increased significantly. I've collected samples of their individual and paired written responses for assessment. I found that children are doing more reading in pairs and were more actively responding to stories. (p.12)

When I visited her classroom in the fall of 1990, I saw the results of her research in action. Using Amigo by Byrd Baylor, Mary had children choose "partner" groups (some worked alone, some in pairs, up to four in a group) and re-read the story, discuss the story using the pictures, then write about their discussion. Here's an excerpt from my field notes:

> I watched and wrote down [partner] conversations. . . . I noticed variations in the process (for example some talked about the task itself: Barry asked Kadmiel "What does it mean to discuss?"), some referred to the text when they lost the gist of the story or had a point to debate about the meaning of the story, some had organized turns for talking, writing, drawing, others were more integrative, inserting new ideas into their cooperative text, even taking the pencil from the other, or erasing and rewriting. (MD: 9/27: 2)

Near the end of the hour, Mary asked the partners to read their interpretive responses to the class. Barry and Kadmiel read theirs together. They had changed the scenario of the original text to a light-hearted fantasy about a Nintendo. Mary praised them for their inventiveness. When it was Michael and Ajay's turn, Michael began a fairly standard retelling, then Ajay finished reading. Some pairs (like John and Parray) made up a new ending. Latasha and Jamaica read their response chorally, retaining the "rap" beat of their retelling. Most students listened to their peers in quiet attention. Some, like Ajay, added to their stories on the basis of what they had heard reported by other groups.

Mary's research to improve students' interpretive responses is ongoing. Satisfied with the structure, at this point she is curious about socially varied responses--including her own:

> There are undoubtedly patterns in all of these groupings. It is noteworthy that each year I have had a pair of Filipino boys form a strong bond. It is also noteworthy that girls change partners more frequently than boys do. High readers don't necessarily make good partners for low readers, but they do seem to make good tutors. But that is not the point of my study. The point is to respond to my students whenever I design a task or set up a whole program. Because, while it is important to understand why students think and act the way they do, what really matters is how I respond to what their thoughts and actions tell me. (Dybdahl, 1990, p. 13)

Discussion

This study suggests that in order to take instructional risks to free children's responses to text, teachers need a regular opportunity to reflect and learn from their practice. Mary and Leslie both valued having nonevaluative observers in the room as support for their efforts, as Mary pointed out:

> I've relied a lot on Sam . . . on her observations and comments. [When she comes out to observe?] Yeah. It has been real helpful because I always try something different and so its always risky. And it is nice to have someone say something positive about it: "Oh, that worked." Or "I saw kids really doing what you're expecting them to do." When I'm thinking: "Oh Gosh, I've blown it again, I'm out on a limb, I've taken a chance." . . . Sometimes I think I shouldn't be experimenting in the same sort of ways that I would as a student teacher . . . sometimes I freak out about that. (MD: 9/27: 10)

Such findings raise questions about appropriate supervision in preservice programs and mentoring role models for beginning teachers.

The most important influence on their instructional changes, however, was Mary's and Leslie's research on their own teaching. While feedback from outsiders could stimulate them to attempt a new structure, their own observations of students' responses to literature tasks helped them change their beliefs as well as their instruction. In the process, they came to value their own experience as knowledge. They were no longer limited to making significant structural changes based on the knowledge of external authorities then retreating to the familiar when the recommended changes failed to work. The emancipation of their own instructional responses in

this way was preparatory to freeing children's responses to literature. We might consider teacher preparation and staff development programs with their stories in mind.

This work also gives us a glimpse of the contribution teachers can make to educational research. Mary's longitudinal research on her own response structures suggests to us (a) the value of increasing children's opportunities for conversation, (b) the importance of friendship in children's learning, and (c) raises methodological questions about the validity of standardized measures to rank children's strengths in reading and writing. Her work also challenges us to reconsider our responses to standard structures in research tasks.

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